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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study which proposes a framework for discovering and exploring particular types of conversational acts which may be interpreted as disconfirming. The study offers examples from existing transcripts of conversations as well as hypothetical conversations which may demonstrate possible disconfirming acts. The empirical-phenomenological method used in the study requires an orientation to the phenomena, the things in themselves. Typically, experiences of individuals are accessed for study through structured interviews. This method is most useful for determining both the processes by which individuals come to make meaning of experience, as well as the characteristics of those experiences to which individuals attach meaning. For example, individuals may use both the content and the relational messages of interaction with their relational partners to make judgments about the nature of the relationship. Relational messages are embedded in the context for the interaction as well as the interactional behaviors of the partners. Therefore, interactional behaviors of relational partners help to define the relationship. Interactional behaviors such as interruption can have significant effects on relational definitions, and how an interactant interprets such behaviors can be observed through the subsequent interactional moves of the partners. Conversation analytic techniques cannot make inferences about what particular conversational acts mean to participants; phenomenological investigations, as well as previous research through other methods, suggest that particular communicative behaviors within the context of relationship are associated with the experience of confirmation/disconfirmation. (Contains 3 notes and 10 references.) (NKA)

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Disconfirming Conversational Acts

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Abstract

Individuals may use both the content and the relational messages of interaction with their relational partners to make judgments about the nature of the relationship. Relational messages are imbedded in the context for the interaction as well as the interactional behaviors of the partners. Therefore, interactional behaviors of relational partners help to define the relationship. Interactional behaviors such as interruption can have significant effects on relational definitions, and how an interactant interprets such behaviors can be observed through the subsequent interactional moves of the partners. Effects of moves such as interruption can include disconfirmation of the partner who was interrupted. This paper attempts to demonstrate how certain types of interactional behavior can be disconfirming in relational terms by using excerpts from actual conversations.

Disconfirming Conversational Acts

Introduction

Confirmation and disconfirmation "build up or tear down" our concepts of self. Both play a role in the development of relationships, and both help to define the nature of relationships. It is within the context of relationship that confirmation and disconfirmation occur. To be sure, the individual experiences confirmation as another validating his or her existence. Whereas, the individual experiences disconfirmation as another invalidating his or her existence.

Conversational acts such as minimal responses, overlaps, and certain types of repairs can be interpreted by conversational partners as disconfirming. A disconfirming act is one which is interpreted as ignoring, interrupting, disrespecting, or otherwise invalidating the other. Confirmation and disconfirmation were described by Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) as communication phenomena which either accept or negate the other, respectively. Cissna and Keating (1979) suggest that a moderate association exists between communicated empathy, respect, and genuineness and the perception of confirmation by the other. By contrast, disconfirmation may be seen either as a lack of confirming messages or messages which have the opposite effect. Cissna and Keating suggest that further research is needed to determine what communication behaviors lead to feelings of being confirmed or disconfirmed. It may be the case that particular conversational acts have the potential of communicating lack of concern for the other.

This study will propose a framework for discovering and exploring particular types of conversational acts which may be interpreted as disconfirming. First, a phenomenological

explication of disconfirmation will be offered. Using this definition of disconfirmation, particular conversational acts which demonstrate the characteristics of disconfirmation will be described.

In order for these acts to be considered disconfirming, evidence regarding the interpretation of the acts as such will need to be shown. For example, if the recipient of a minimal response queries, "Are you listening to me," then that recipient may be communicating that he or she feels ignored and therefore disconfirmed. The function of such a recipient response may be to confront the violation of an expectation. However, the feeling of being disconfirmed cannot be demonstrated unless it is explicitly stated, or is derived from an interview with individuals about disconfirmation. This study is therefore part of a larger program of study which is interested in determining the form of disconfirming messages. This study will propose examples from existing transcripts as well as hypothetical conversations which may demonstrate possible disconfirming conversational acts.

Method

The empirical-phenomenological method requires an orientation to the phenomena, the things in themselves. Typically, experiences of individuals are accessed for study through structured interviews. This method is most useful for determining both the processes by which individuals come to make meaning of experience, as well as the characteristics of those experiences to which individuals attach meaning.

Conversation analytic techniques also orient to the phenomena. As a specific ethnomethodological method, conversation analysis attempts to determine how conversational partners co-construct meaning. The conversation analyst seeks to discover and describe how interactants define relationship through interactional moves. To accomplish this, naturally

occurring conversations are taped and transcribed. Utterances within the conversation are described and analyzed by function. The function of a given utterance or set of utterances is determined by the interactants themselves through subsequent moves. It is in this sense that conversation analytic techniques orient to the phenomena. That is, analysts describe how interactants orient to each other within the context of a conversation.

Disconfirmation

LeBlanc, Hedinger, Smith and West (1993), developed an interview protocol and conducted interviews to determine the characteristics and nature of confirmation and disconfirmation. The structure of disconfirmation versus confirmation varied by three major axes: (a) inclusion/exclusion, (b) self-imposed/ other-imposed, and (c) ego-centric, other-centric and relationship-centric orientations.

Disconfirmation was described as associated with other-imposed exclusion. Individuals feel disconfirmed when the expectation of group membership is not met, and when investment is made by the self (ego-centric) for group membership, or when the relationship to the other (relationship-centric) is considered important by the individual. Self-imposed exclusion is not associated with feelings of disconfirmation. On the contrary, self-imposed exclusion may have an empowering effect on the individual by allowing the individual to exercise freedom from the unwanted expectations of the group, while at the same time be disconfirming to those (in the group) being excluded.

Confirmation is associated with inclusion, self or other-imposed, when inclusion is desired. The desire for inclusion may be ego, other, or relationship- centric. It is the degree of importance placed on the relationship to the other which minimally or maximally determines the

intensity of feelings of confirmation or disconfirmation. Yet it is the act of inclusion and exclusion by self or other which is referred to as the confirming or disconfirming act.

Characteristics of disconfirming conversational acts

In order to approach possible forms of disconfirming conversational acts, some general criteria for such acts must be enumerated. According to Grice (1975), maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner specify general principles of discourse. Conversational interactants may come to expect that their partner will not violate these general principles. In terms of effect on relationships, violations of these conversational expectations may contribute to difficulties in understanding, affect, and development of trust. For example, a violation of the quantity maxim may communicate to the recipient a lack of concern for the recipient's needs or a lack of trust in the recipient. A violation of the quality, relation and manner maxims may also produce this effect. However, this effect is contingent upon the recipient's interpretation of the violation.

Disconfirmation occurs when there is a violation of a relational expectation. For example, an individual may expect his or her relational partner to show concern and trust. If that expectation is violated, then the individual may suffer from feelings of being disconfirmed. An example of a violation of the quantity maxim which may affect feelings of being disconfirmed is the minimal response. The minimal response occurs when an individual expects that a conversational partner will respond in such a way that does not violate the quantity maxim. In the following excerpt, from the University of Texas Conversation Library (UTCL)[1, 2] and designated D6POST.1:4, M (male) asks a series of questions which do not receive answers.

(1)

171 M: How bout you ↑how are your finals (shaping up
172 with that-) d'you have five of em like me

⇒	173		(2.2)
	174	M:	You don't wanna
⇒	175		(1.8) ((loud airplane noise))
	176	M:	You don't wanna talk about it
⇒	177	F:	↑heh heh heh
	178		(9.2) ((noises))
	179	M:	Actually I cannot wait- to go and see you and
	180		Lee
⇒	181		(3.5)
	182	M:	How's it gun be interesting.
	183		(4.0) ((crumpling))
⇒	184	F:	pt ↑heh heh heh
	185		heh (.) heh ·hhh
	186	M:	How is it going to be interesting
	187	F:	Put- the tape recorder down

In this interaction, F (female) does not answer a series of questions asked by M. In lines 171-172, M asks three distinct questions. The first question asks for acknowledgment; the second asks for information, and the third question requests agreement. Yet, F does not answer any of the three questions. M allows for a response by leaving a gap at a transition relevance place (TRP). When a response is not forthcoming M self-selects the next turn at talk with another attempt at eliciting a response. Lines 173, 175, 177, 181, and 184 each specify opportunities for F to respond in such a way that answers M's requests. However, in each case F violates the quantity maxim.

In the above example, F laughs at lines 177, 184, and 185. Laughter does not appear to be relevant to the requests for information made by M but rather appears to be unrelated. Finally, in line 187, F instructs M to "put the tape recorder down." This sequence demonstrates that F is attending to something other than M's utterances. By not attending to the utterances of her partner, F violates the relevancy maxim. It is possible that M is not paying attention to an event

to which F has turned her attention. However, the following hypothesized excerpt demonstrates a possible reaction by M to F's inattention to the conversation:

(2)

```
182   M:    How's it gun be interesting.
183         (4.0)  ((crumpling))
184   F:    pt ↑heh heh heh
185         heh  (.)  ↑heh ·hhh
186   M:    How is it going to be interesting
187   F:    Put- the tape recorder down
188   M:    Why aren't you listening to me
```

In (fictitious) line 188, M draws attention to and makes relationally relevant F's minimal responses.

According to LeBlanc (1990), minimal responses have several possible distinguishing, but not mutually exclusive, characteristics:

1. Minimal responses (MR) follow the first pair-part of an adjacency pair which incorporates conditional relevance.
2. MR may involve repetition of the first pair-part of an adjacency pair.
3. MR may involve repetition of a statement or assertion by the originator.
4. MR may involve a topic shift by the other in the second pair-part of an adjacency pair.
5. Dispreferred responses or lack of preferred responses may occur in MR.
6. MR are often no responses at all.
7. MR may involve significant pauses known as gaps at TRP's.
8. MR may involve a lack of turn-taking selection by the other following gaps.

9. Following a minimal response, the originator normally continues (self-selects) after a gap.
10. MR are often characterized by extended turns by the initiator which include many TRP's and gaps.
11. Conversation is normally between two people, but conversations characterized by MR may seem one-sided.
12. Conversations characterized by MR may give one interactant a subjective sense of non-listening on the part of the other.

The above excerpts demonstrate each of these characteristics. The hypothesized excerpt makes explicit the "subjective sense of non-listening on the part of the other" (LeBlanc, 1990). The main characteristic of minimal responses is that they fail to meet the expectation of a response, whether preferred or dispreferred, and therefore violate the quantity maxim. Minimal responses violate the relation or relevancy (Nofsinger, 1991) maxim by not attending to the immediately preceding utterances. Minimal responses also may violate the manner maxim which requires that interactants be clear in their contributions to the interaction and respond "with reasonable dispatch" (Grice, 1975). Conversation requires cooperation by participants, which minimal responses fail to accomplish.

Minimal responses therefore may be interpreted by one interactant as showing of a lack of concern by the other. Interactants demonstrate invalidation of the other or the other's message as important by not orienting to it through response. Minimal responses ignore the relevance of the other's utterance. This demonstration of a lack of concern may be experienced as a feeling of disconfirmation.

Another type of conversational act which might demonstrate a lack of concern for the other is the overlap which is treated as an interruption. Drummond (1989) argued that not all overlaps can be interpreted as interruptions. He further argues that interruption does not exist as "codable, countable phenomena." In the following excerpt, designated as (UTCL) F1CUP.1, the parties do not treat the overlap as an interruption:

(3)

```
      9     M:    an you jus- jus heat that u:p (0.6) an pour it
      10          over your meat (.) an-⌈
⇒     11    D:                          ⌊↑Kitchen Bouquet=
      12    M:    =Yeah you know that stuff that makes things
      13          brown=
      14          D:  =mm hm
      15    M:    ·hhh Jus heat that up an pour it over your meat
      16          and turn your meat on as low as it will go
```

Line 11 is treated as a relevant insertion sequence. Yet, in line 15, M (mother) restates and continues the point started in line 9. It is possible for this insertion to be treated as an interruption. For example, in this hypothetical conversation, M treats D's (daughter) overlap as an interruption:

(4)

```
      9     M:    an you jus- jus heat that u:p (0.6) an pour it
      10          over your meat (.) an⌈
      11    D:                         ⌊↑Kitchen Bouquet=
      12    M:    =would you let me finish! turn your meat on as
      13          low as it will go
```

The subtext of the response in line 12 might be, "you have interrupted me." Drummond's (1989) contention, that the specification of an interruption in a transcription is an evaluative act, is a

point well taken. However, interruptions do occur as a subset of overlaps in which the current conversational partner treats the overlap as a "deep incursion" into his or her utterance.

Lerner (1989) argues that the delayed completion is evidence that an overlap is interruptive. In example (3), line 15 is a delayed completion of the instruction started on line 9. Lerner (1989) states, "The continuation (i.e., the delayed completion) is thereby asserted to be part of the same turn space occupied by that prior utterance, thus characterizing the intervening utterance as interruptive of the now finished single turn-constructional unit" (p. 171).

If certain types of overlaps can be described as interruptive from characteristics such as delayed completion, and if individuals talk about interruption and develop relational rules such as, "Don't interrupt: it is impolite," then interruption must exist as a phenomenon in conversations. Indeed, the existence of such relational rules suggest that expectations about conversational partners' behaviors regarding interruptions are important and may result in interpretations of impoliteness or as communicating lack of concern for the other and thus experienced as disconfirming. Brown and Levinson (1987), argue that politeness is a universal rule or maxim regulating conversational interaction. As argued above, the violation of relational expectations, including conversational maxims may induce disconfirmation.

A final type of conversational act which also may induce disconfirmation is other-initiated repair sequences. In other-initiated repair sequences, the conversational partner responds to the current speaker's repairable (Nofsinger, 1991; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). In the following excerpt[3], F (female) initiates a repair of M's (male) repairable:

(5)

	1	M:	I'll take almost all of it out to the Regína auction
⇒	2	F:	Regeena

3 M: Regeena

In this excerpt, M mispronounces Regina. F initiates a repair of the mispronunciation by supplying the correct pronunciation. Yet, it is not difficult to imagine a sequence in which one individual appears defensive following an other-initiated repair. The following hypothetical excerpt illustrates this:

(6)

1 M: I'll take almost all of it out to the Regína auction
2 F: Regeena
3 M: Why are you always correcting me?

In this excerpt, M evaluates F's repair initiator as inappropriate. Line 3 appears to specify a relational rule that has been violated by F. The expectation that M had regarding the interaction is that conversational partners should not correct each other habitually. This particular example may demonstrate a violation of politeness rules.

In example (6), M may also interpret the other-initiated repair as a deep incursion into the topic, and is thus interruptive in nature. The subtext of this example may be, "You don't seem concerned for my feelings because you are not interested in what I say but only how I say it." Both possibilities, other-initiated repair as a violation of politeness rules or as interruption, suggests that certain types of repairs may precipitate feelings of disconfirmation.

Discussion

The above argument does not suggest that minimal responses, interruptions, and other-initiated repairs are exclusively disconfirming conversational acts. However, the occurrence of these acts may be interpreted by interactional partners as disconfirming. Common elements of these three acts include some form of violation of an expected occurrence.

In the case of the minimal response the expectation is that the interactional partner will offer a certain amount of relevant information in response to the a question, assertion or other type of first pair-part of an adjacency pair. The minimal response is a violation of Grice's (1975) cooperative principle. However, it may have even deeper implications for the relationship, such as a demonstration of an attitude of indifference toward the other. Minimal responses as a habitual pattern of behavior for one or both partners of a dyad may be illustrative of the health of the relationship.

For interruptions, the expectation violated is that the interactional partner will share conversational space with the current speaker. This may also be viewed as a violation of the quantity maxim. In the case of a tangential interruption, an interruption that takes the topic in a new direction, it may also violate the relevance or relation maxim. This type of conversational act may have a disconfirming effect in that the current speaker feels that his or her choice of topic is unimportant to the other.

In other-initiated repair sequences the expectation violated is that the interactional partner will be polite. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is a universal face-saving rule. Face-threatening or embarrassment may occur when an individual is corrected by another. Face-threatening may also violate a relational rule regarding loyalty. This act may have a disconfirming effect by communicating the attitude that the other's feelings are unimportant.

In all three types of conversational acts the possibility for interpretation as a relational message is apparent in the function of the act. Minimal responses, interruptions, and other-initiated repair may all communicate a lack of concern for the other.

Disconfirmation is not directly apparent in the structure of the conversational act. Rather, disconfirmation is an evaluation imputed upon a given conversational act. Yet, disconfirmation is the experience of feeling ignored, interrupted, or invalidated. In our common discourse about conversation, such as the relational rules specified by, "Don't interrupt, it's impolite," we demonstrate how these conversational acts can have disconfirming effects.

Conclusion

Conversation analysis is a method which describes the function of particular conversational phenomena. As a descriptive method, it should serve as a basis for the discovery of the characteristics of relational messages. However, the present study demonstrated some limitations of this method. Conversation analysis is interested only in the function of moves as they are oriented to by interactional partners. Conversation analysis neither attempts nor purports to attempt to describe the cognitive processing of the interactants. It does not examine possible interactional choices, only those which actually occur.

Due to this self-imposed limitation, conversation analytic techniques cannot make inferences about what particular conversational acts mean to participants. Nor can these techniques determine the possible choices interactants have for conversational moves. Phenomenological investigations, as well as previous research through other methods, suggest that particular communicative behaviors within the context of relationship are associated with the experience of confirmation and disconfirmation. The nature of the phenomenon investigated here suggests that multiple methods must be employed to fully describe both the characteristics of the phenomenon, the meaning associated with the phenomenon, and its effects on interpersonal relationships.

To this end, an appropriate way to investigate confirmation and disconfirmation may be to characterize conversational acts which can potentially be interpreted as confirming and disconfirming, then interview participants about the meaning they associated with the acts.

Understanding which communicative behaviors may contribute to feelings of confirmation and disconfirmation ultimately may help individuals in the development and maintenance of their relationships.

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Footnotes

[1] The Speech Communication Department at the University of Texas at Austin has developed a collection of recorded conversations and transcripts for conversation analytic research, known as the University of Texas Conversation Library (UTCL).

[2] The special notation used in the conversational excerpts is taken from the transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson for conversation analysis (see J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (Eds.). (1984). *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis,* (pp. ix-xvii). London: Cambridge University.

Symbol	*Function*
⌈ or ⌊	Indicates beginning of overlapping utterances.
⌉ or ⌋	Indicates ending of overlapping utterances.
=	Latching of contiguous utterances.
-	Abrupt halting of sound.
(1.2)	Timed pause in seconds.
(.)	Micropause of less than 0.2 seconds.
↑ or ↓	Rising or falling shift in intonation.
___	Stressed sound.
·hhh	Audible inbreath.
heh	Laugh particle.
( )	Inaudible or muffled sound or utterance.
(( ))	Transcriber's comments.

[3] This excerpt was taken from class notes: SPCM 546, Conversation Analysis, Southern Illinois University, Assoc. Prof. Bryan K. Crow.